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Does “Mediterranean” Mean Better For You?

You might think, with the number of new products on the shelves recently, that any food that comes from or is used in the Mediterranean, is healthy. At least that's what the advertising implies. But, while the over-all diet and lifestyle from the Mediterranean area does seem to lead to fewer heart attacks, picking just one food out of that mix does not guarantee you longer life or better health.

One recent example is the popularity of olive oil and olive oil-containing foods. Even some margarines and butter substitutes are now advertising their olive oil content. But does that automatically make them better for your heart or your waistline? No.

Olive oil, just like every other oil, contains the same number of calories as other fats. No matter the source, all fats contain 9 calories per gram. Olive oil, coconut oil and any other oil contain about 124 calories per tablespoon. Butter and solid margarines contain about 100 calories per tablespoon, because they also contain some water. Whipped spreads and diet margarines might have a few as 50 calories per tablespoon, because they have extra water and air beaten into them. Neither water nor air have any calories.

The other benefit advertising tries to promote is that olive oil is better for your heart. Well, true, it is better than butter, lard or coconut oil. But olive oil by itself does not lower the bad cholesterol or raise the good cholesterol in our blood. Olive oil is one of the neutral fats. It doesn't help cholesterol, but it doesn't harm it either. It doesn't have trans fats, or saturated fats. That is good, but neither do canola or soy oil.

And unfortunately, like many margarines, these olive oil margarines are rather

high in sodium. A tablespoon of one brand has 90 mg of sodium, while the same amount of unsalted butter has only 2 mg. If you are on a strict low sodium diet, they are not for you.

So if you're trying to keep your heart healthy for your Valentine, opt for the whole Mediterranean diet - lots of fruits and vegetables, more fish than red meat, whole grain pastas, some olive oil, and plenty of exercise. That's more than they offer in a tub of margarine, and a lot healthier for you.

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